



SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery

for people who are homeless

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Collaboration with SSA and DDS: Something for Everyone

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The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR) Technical Assistance (TA) Center helps states and communities increase access to Social Security disability benefits for people with disabilities who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness. To achieve this goal, collaborations with the Social Security Administration (SSA) and each state's Disability Determination Services (DDS) agency are essential. Local SOAR projects can assist SSA and DDS to make better and quicker decisions for claimants who are homeless and, similarly, SSA and DDS can help to streamline the disability determination process for SOAR providers and the applicants they serve.

The SOAR approach is designed to address many of the challenges that SSA¹ and DDS² face when serving people who are experiencing homelessness. SOAR providers

- maintain ongoing communication with the applicant;
- serve as the applicant's appointed representative using the SSA-1696;
- provide transportation and accompany applicants to appointments;
- complete the online Social Security Disability application (iClaim) and Disability Report (i3368);
- provide complete documentation and signed paperwork, medical records, and a detailed medical summary report; and
- provide timely follow-up to SSA and DDS's requests for additional information.

All of this helps shorten the application processing time by providing complete information and avoiding consultative examinations (CEs). Focusing on "getting it right the first time" avoids re-applications and appeals, which put additional burdens on the system.

This issue brief explores how SOAR collaborates with SSA and DDS, what roles each plays in a successful partnership, and the benefits to SSA and DDS of collaborating with state and local SOAR programs.

Reaching Out to SSA and DDS

SOAR leaders are encouraged to identify a liaison from SSA to work with them as they begin to implement SOAR. SOAR leaders can start by calling the *public affairs specialist* in their SSA Area or Regional Office. Ask if there is a homeless liaison or homeless coordinator who can be a point of contact for SOAR-trained providers in the community. The SOAR TA Center (soar@prainc.com) can also help establish lines of communication with the SSA field office.

¹ SSA, the federal agency that administers the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) programs, is organized into regional, area, district, and field offices located around the country. SSA's central offices are located in Baltimore, Maryland. SSA has been collaborating at all levels with SOAR since SOAR began in 2005. There are 10 regional SSA offices (<http://www.ssa.gov/regions/regional.html>). Each region covers a number of area offices that encompass a state or a part of a state. Area offices oversee district offices and local field offices. There are approximately 1,260 field offices across the 50 states and territories.

² DDS is a state agency charged with making disability determinations for SSA. SSA contracts with each state's DDS agency, which then operates under the federal SSA guidelines. The name of the agency may vary by state (e.g. Disability Determination Bureau, Disability Adjudication Services, Disability Determination Division), but they all function in much the same way.

Georgia's SSA and DDS Collaboration

The SSA Area Office for Georgia and the Georgia Disability Adjudication Services (DAS) have been partners in Georgia's SOAR initiative since 2005, providing ongoing support and technical assistance. Under their leadership, each SSA field office in the state has a designated homeless liaison for SOAR providers to contact for direct assistance.

In 2005, DAS established Homeless Specialty Units in all four DAS offices in the state. SOAR claims can be flagged as "Homeless" and "SOAR" at the SSA field offices and at DAS using unit codes and special remarks. Cases that are flagged in this way are assigned to the Homeless Specialty Units at DAS within two business days. This enables DAS to provide quarterly data on approval rates and average processing time for SOAR claims and homeless claims not assisted by SOAR providers.

A disability adjudicator from the DAS Homeless Specialty Unit and a representative from SSA participate in monthly SOAR Provider Coalition meetings and attend statewide SOAR trainings to answer questions for participants. SOAR providers have direct contact information for the DAS examiners processing SOAR claims. The disability determination process is transparent and advocates are informed, connected, and actively involved in the process.

Once an SSA contact has been identified, share information about SOAR and your community's efforts. You can use "What Is SOAR?" on the SOAR website <http://soarworks.samhsa.gov/content/what-soar> as a reference. Invite the contact to a local SOAR planning committee meeting or SOAR training. If they are unable to attend due to travel restrictions, offer to visit them at their offices. Be sure to provide at least 4 weeks advance notice when inviting SSA or DDS to SOAR events.

Similarly, SOAR leaders can contact the *medical or professional relations officer* at the state's DDS office. As with SSA, invite this person to a local planning meeting or training. If they are unable to leave the office, invite them to join the meeting by phone. Ask if there is someone who can serve as a DDS liaison to the SOAR project to address questions or concerns that may arise.

How SSA and DDS Work with SOAR

SSA regional, area, and field offices have helped support SOAR projects by

- identifying a point of contact at SSA and DDS with whom SOAR leaders can communicate;
- attending state and/or local SOAR planning meetings, trainings and ongoing steering committee meetings; and
- establishing statewide or local SOAR processes that help streamline communication and processing.

In many states, a SOAR application is flagged as "homeless" in the SSA field office and identified as a "SOAR" claim in the electronic remarks. This indicates

to DDS that they are receiving a SOAR claim. Flagging a claim as SOAR also conveys to DDS that they should expect a complete and well-documented claim and access to a SOAR contact person who will respond quickly if additional information is needed.

DDS offices across the country have collaborated with SOAR providers in a number of mutually beneficial ways:

- Ongoing communication between the medical or professional relations officer and SOAR steering committees promotes improved processing of claims from homeless applicants.
- DDS liaisons attend SOAR trainings when possible.
- SOAR applications flagged in the SSA field office are quickly assigned to an examiner or routed to a designated examiner or group of examiners who process claims from persons experiencing homelessness.

SOAR providers have a lot at stake in their relationships with SSA and DDS. When successful, SOAR can be instrumental in ending the cycle of homelessness by establishing a consistent source of income and health insurance with which the claimant can secure housing, treatment, and other supports. SOAR staff

- work closely with DDS to identify and obtain additional records and reports from treatment sources,
- spend additional time interviewing applicants and collateral sources to ensure the treatment sources are fully identified,

- follow up with unresponsive medical providers and immediately send medical records they receive to DDS at no cost, and
- reach out to SSA and DDS staff to find out if there is anything else needed for the claimant's file.

Benefits to SSA and DDS

When SOAR staff provide complete medical records and detailed functional information there is a decreased need for CEs, saving processing time and money. With more complete applications, DDS examiners are able to make more accurate and better documented decisions than otherwise possible. Society as a whole benefits from addressing homelessness in a more effective and systemic manner. And the applicant can begin his or her journey on the road to recovery.

Caroline Mason of the Maryland DDS describes the ways DDS benefits from the approach of SOAR case managers and the quality of claims they submit. She says that SOAR case managers

- are trained to complete applications with claimants, providing the correct paperwork

and extensive detail to DDS examiners at the beginning of the claims adjudication process;

- become the authorized representative, using the SSA-1696, which allows DDS examiners to communicate directly with SOAR case managers, resulting in more timely responses to inquiries and assistance locating the claimant;
- collect medical records for the claim, which allows DDS to process the claim in a timely manner; and
- compose a narrative, called a medical summary report or letter, that describes the individual's medical and mental health conditions and functional impairments. DDS examiners find this report very useful when completing their medical review as it provides vital information that is often not in the medical records of individuals who are homeless.

In addition, Caroline finds that SOAR applications

- are complete and comprehensive allowing for timely and accurate decisions at the front end and

Recognizing Our SSA and DDS Collaborators

Illinois. Mike Nolan, with the SSA Region V Center for Disability in Chicago, is an enthusiastic SOAR supporter. He has participated in SOAR strategic planning meetings in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio, where he offered the support of SSA's Chicago Regional Office. He has facilitated collaborations with local and area SSA offices in his Region and generously answered questions and provided feedback to staff of the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center on numerous occasions.

Kansas. "Walter Rivera of the DDS in Topeka has been key to my understanding of the disability determination process. He is always patient with me, no matter what I ask him. Without him, our SOAR process would be much more difficult," says Jessica Slocum, SOAR Case Manager, Elizabeth Layton Center, Ottawa, KS.

New Jersey. David Vinokurov, District Manager of the SSA District Office in Trenton, joined the Mercer County SOAR Steering Committee in 2010. With his help, New Jersey's SOAR process is implemented statewide and medical records are submitted using SSA's Electronic Records Express (ERE) system. David says, "The Trenton SSA office works collaboratively with NJ SOAR on all aspects of eligibility and entitlement requirements so that they can share accurate information with homeless clients and various partner agencies. Our NJ SOAR team supports our programs, assists with online applications, answers questions, and distributes SSA materials. We truly appreciate their efforts." David wishes to recognize **Andrea L. Raza**, Greater Trenton Behavioral HealthCare SOAR Coordinator, and **Diane Hirko**, Family Guidance SOAR Coordinator who, he says, "work tirelessly to represent the most vulnerable clients in our communities."

Oregon. "Marjorie Garcia at the DDS is a wonderful resource for our program. She is always looking for ways to decrease the time it takes analysts at her office to make decisions on our cases. She arranged for us to come to the DDS offices in Salem where we talked with examiners about homelessness and how through SOAR they were helping our clients. Marjorie's commitment to SOAR is a big part of our success as well as the peace and life of our clients," says Kascadare Causeya, BEST Program Manager, Central City Concern, Portland, OR.

Maryland's SOAR Partnership

In 2008, the Maryland SOAR initiative was two years old and new leadership was being provided by the State Department of Mental Health and Hygiene. A group of key partners that included DDS, SSA, state agency staff, and community providers met in Baltimore to discuss implementing SOAR in two pilot sites before going statewide. The Medical Relations Director at DDS, **Caroline Mason**, agreed to coordinate SOAR within DDS and be the liaison to community providers.

Together the group put together a plan. The DDS identified and trained claims examiners to work SOAR-related claims. Homeless claims were often difficult to decide due to transient treatment histories, lack of communication, and missed CEs. The SOAR process overcame many of these barriers. The claims were more comprehensive and the DDS adjudicator had a representative (the SOAR case manager) available to help secure any missing information. SOAR claims tended not to need CEs and decisions were made more quickly, which was appreciated by the DDS examiner as well as the individual applying for benefits.

Currently, SOAR claims arrive from multiple communities in the state. The SSA field office enters a flag (e.g., "Homeless" or "Representative") into the claimant's electronic folder, which tells DDS that this is a priority claim. In addition, SSA staff enters "SOAR Claim" in the web-based system's remarks section or dialogue box. Claims are also identified as SOAR in the DDS information system, which allows DDS to track these claims. As of December 2013, the Baltimore SOAR program had decisions on 293 claims with a 92 percent approval rate in an average of 58 days. Statewide, 86 percent of 360 applications have been approved in an average of 70 days.

Communication among partners at all levels, including community agency directors, case managers, state agency staff, DDS examiners, and the SSA field office liaisons, is a major factor in the success of SOAR in Maryland. There are expectations to meet, procedures to follow, and established approaches to address the inevitable bumps along the road.

avoiding reconsiderations, unnecessary denials, or repeat applications;

- result in fewer technical denials due to insufficient medical evidence because, with a SOAR case manager assisting in the process, more evidence is gathered and treatment can be arranged or provided by the case manager's agency; and
- reduce the number of SOAR claimants requiring CEs, which are necessary only when there is insufficient evidence available to make a medical determination.

Establishing a SOAR Process

The SOAR process is a set of formalized and customized procedures outlining how SOAR providers will submit disability applications to SSA and DDS in their state or community. The process is developed so that all parties know what to expect and whom to contact if any part of the process breaks down. The SOAR process helps to reduce duplication of effort to save time and resources.

A template for developing a SOAR process is available from the SAMHSA SOAR TA Center at http://soarworks.samhsa.gov/sites/soarworks.prainc.com/files/SOAR_Process_Template_6.2013.docx

Generally the process includes

- dedicated homeless or SOAR liaison at the local SSA field office(s) and at DDS;
- use of the SOAR Consent to Release Information to establish the protective filing date;
- agreement that SOAR providers have up to 60 days after establishing the protective filing date to prepare and submit a complete application packet;
- electronic submission of all available forms and documentation; and
- electronic flagging at SSA of "homeless" applications and adding "SOAR" to the Remarks section prior to transfer of claim to DDS.

For More Information

This issue brief was produced by the SOAR Technical Assistance Center under contract to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The SOAR Technical Assistance Center develops and provides training and technical assistance to support adults who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness to apply for SSA disability benefits. For more information about SOAR or to find other briefs in this series, go to <http://soarworks.samhsa.gov>.